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An analysis of the influences of editorial endorsements and campaign expenditures on California propositions

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCES OF EDITORIAL ENDORSEMENTS AND CAMPAIGN EXPENDITURES ON CALIFORNIA BALLOT PROPOSITIONS

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ABSTRACT

AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCES OF EDITORIAL ENDORSEMENTS AND CAMPAIGN EXPENDITURES ON CALIFORNIA BALLOT PROPOSITIONS

By James Bailey

This thesis examined the relationship between ballot proposition campaign expenditures, newspaper editorial endorsements, and election results, and found no discernable trend among these variables.

Specifically, the study looked at the California general elections of 1982, 1984, 1986, and 1988. The newspapers studied were the San Jose Mercury News and the Sacramento Bee. Editorial influence in the newspaper's market was looked for by comparing the market's vote totals to statewide vote totals. Since campaign environments vary from year to year a financial factor was devised to prevent from comparing raw campaign expenditures over several elections.

The propositions were ranked according to money expended. The vote comparisons were independent of either voter agreement with the editorial or the final disposition of the vote election. What was measured was a shift in local voting patterns (when compared to the state) either with or against the newspapers endorsement.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The ballot proposition is becoming a very powerful legislative tool in the hands of many American voters.[1] Nowhere is this more evident than in California. The California voter has put complex regulations on the state auto insurance industry, enacted taxes on the tobacco industry, rejected hand-gun control, and made English the official language of the state. This is just a sample of the dozens of propositions that voters in California considered in the 1980s.

As ballot propositions grow in importance so do their campaigns. Highly controversial legislation sometimes bypasses elected representatives and is sent directly to the voters. Some propositions affect corporate well-being, and consequently draw millions of dollars in campaign funds to influence an election, while others have no campaigns and are decided by voters without any money being spent on them.

Ballot propositions differ enough from candidate campaigns that they offer researchers fresh views of the electoral process. "First, analyzing campaigns and voting patterns on the initiative and referendum can tell us a great deal about the political process as it operates in the absence of the usually dominant party and candidate

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[1]Within this research the term proposition includes referenda, initiatives, and bond measures.

activities and cues" (Zisk, 1987, p. 10). Propositions have no past record of performance, no party affiliation, and lack the personality of a candidate.

Voters have learned to use cues and other visual and auditory gestures from candidates to determine, among other things, character judgements about that candidate (Rosenberg & McCafferty, 1987). A ballot proposition therefore, deprives voters of critical elements in their decision-making process.

The lack of a personal character has become such a point of contention that some political strategists try to affiliate a proposition to a known personality. In the 1988 battle of the auto insurance propositions, for example, the prevailing initiative, Proposition 103, was endorsed by consumer advocate Ralph Nader. Throughout the final weeks of the campaign Nader became closely identified with Proposition 103. This tactic has been used by proposition opponents as well. They attempt to identify a measure with an unpopular political figure. While the political figure may be successful in his or her own state senate or assembly district, he or she may be unpopular with the state as a whole.

Another distinctive facet of ballot propositions is that they have a "no" option. That is to say, by casting a "no" vote, nothing changes. This is considerably different from

voting for a candidate, whether challenger or incumbent, who may act unpredictably once in office. This has created a new tactic for opponents of a given proposition, who no longer have to persuade the voter so much as to confuse him to the point that "no" simply seems like the safer alternative. This assertion is supported by Lowenstein's (1982) finding that one-sided spending is far more effective in opposition to, rather than in support of, a ballot measure.

The State of California does publish a voter guide to each election, and it is mailed to every registered voter. Each state proposition on the ballot is discussed within the guide. The information is presented in several different ways. The first is a summary of the legislation. This usually includes a cost analysis of the enactment or enforcement of the legislation. The second part of the information is arguments both for and against the proposition. The third section is a rebuttal to the pro and con arguments. Finally, the fourth section is the actual wording of the proposition.

There is no question that voters use this guide in their decision-making process. The essence of this guide is objectivity or balance. The state takes no position and the arguments for and against are presented in equal fashion. While this no doubt contributes to the voters' knowledge,

its objectivity and balance set it distinctly apart from paid political advertising and editorial endorsements.

The San Jose Mercury News (Pope, 1988) reported that nearly twice the money was spent on the five auto insurance propositions (ballot numbers; 100, 101, 103, 104, and 106) than the total spent by either Bush or Dukakis in their pursuit of the White House. Bribing a legislator may be forbidden, but spending lavishly on media to persuade the California voter about a proposition is considered business as usual.

With propositions presenting such atypical campaign environments, (when compared to traditional candidate elections) it is not unreasonable to suspect that a voter's reliance on sources of information may shift as well. One source that is consistent in both candidate and proposition campaigns is the newspaper editorial endorsement.

Previous work (Gregg, 1965) has shown that the more information a voter has, the less influential the editorial endorsement. Some propositions have sophisticated campaigns conducted by political consultants. It seems likely that the more money a campaign generates, the more paid media to which the voters will be exposed. On the other hand, California voters are asked to make decisions on propositions that have generated little press, little money, and little public interest.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between newspaper editorial election endorsements, election results, and the amounts of money available to each proposition campaign. The study was confined to California state ballot propositions. Little research has been done in this area specifically, the balance are studies done tangentially to investigations of endorsements of traditional candidates.

While it is not possible to determine a strict cause and effect relationship between editorial endorsements and election results, this study has been designed to detect subtle shifts in voting patterns. If patterns emerge in separate newspaper markets over various elections, it might be possible to make meaningful generalizations about future elections.

If voters do rely more heavily on editorial endorsements in deciding how to vote for modestly funded ballot propositions then such a relationship should be detected by this study. Where does the voter turn for advice when many traditional sources for evaluation are foreclosed? One possibility is editorial endorsements by the local newspaper. Does the amount of money expended by a campaign affect the influence an editorial endorsement may have? The results of this research should yield some insights into these questions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Any democratic form of government depends on the free flow of information to the electorate. This flow of information and how the voters use it in their decision-making process has long been of interest to social scientists.

Gosnell (1937) studied politics in Chicago. One chapter of his book covered the "Relation of the Press to Voting." Gosnell looked at the editorial views and political coverage of five daily Chicago newspapers with voting changes in census tracts of differing economic and social composition. He looked at eight elections from 1930 to 1936. Gosnell's results with regard to local elections were inconclusive. When he looked specifically at the presidential elections of 1932 and 1936, however, he concluded that the newspapers did have a persuasive effect on voters.

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) undertook a study of 2,400 residents of Erie County, Ohio in the seven months preceding the 1940 presidential election. Their results were to contribute to what would become known as the social influence model, because they found that interpersonal communication far outweighed the mass media in influencing voter decisions. "Whenever the respondents were asked to report on their recent exposure to campaign

communications of all kinds, political discussions were mentioned more frequently than exposure to radio or print" (Lazarsfeld et al., p. 151).

In retrospect we can see that the Erie County study measured direct effects and was not constructed to detect the subtler indirect effects now thought to play such an important role in opinion formulation. Consequently, media were thought to have minimal effects on voter opinions.

In all fairness, it must be pointed out that the world of the early 1940s bore almost no resemblance to the world today. Media that are now considered pervasive and indispensable were still considered novelties by many of the people of the early 1940s. Nevertheless, the notion that media had little effect on voter preferences was to prevail throughout the 1950s.

Social science research techniques improved by the 1950s and were being applied to voter studies. The impression remained, however, that the media had little impact on voter decision-making, and that line of inquiry was dropped. Some researchers turned their attention to the sociological and psychological factors influencing voter behavior. Campbell's (1952, 1954) research is a good example of this.

In the 1960s the growing sophistication of the relationship between the media and politics (e.g., the Kennedy-Nixon debates) renewed interest in media impact on

elections. The "minimal effects" theory was questioned and attention returned to, among other areas, the effect of editorial endorsements on voters.

Mayo (1964) found a relationship between party affiliation and voter information sources. In the 1961 Sam Yorty-James Poulson race for mayor of Los Angeles, Democrats tended to get their information from television and radio while Republicans relied more on newspapers for their information. Information, in this instance, is diverse in nature and includes news, entertainment, editorial, and advertising.

Gregg (1965) conducted a broad study examining newspaper editorial endorsements and California elections, between 1948-62. His study included interviews with a sampling of the readers of the Santa Barbara News-Press and 39% of those interviewed indicated that they "always" or "occasionally" took the newspaper's sample ballot with them to the polls. Gregg found a stronger correlation between editorial endorsements and ballot propositions and local candidates specifically when compared to national candidates.

Gregg also found that newspaper endorsements had less influence when the voter had more sources of information about the candidate. Further, newspapers with reputations for outstanding reporting and forthright editorializing on

local politics were more influential than those papers which tended to avoid local controversy. Additionally, Gregg established that as controversy surrounding a ballot measure increased, the influence of editorial endorsements decreased.

In 1967 McCombs supported some of Gregg's (1965) results and failed to support others. Unlike Gregg, McCombs found that endorsements for statewide office had more impact than endorsements for local offices. McCombs, however, included television endorsements in his study as well as newspaper. Unrelated to Gregg's work, McCombs found that editorial endorsements become more influential in the absence of other voting cues, such as party identification or other pre-established attitudes.

Mueller (1969) specifically examined California ballot propositions and weighed the various elements that traditionally affect voter decisions. One factor examined was newspaper editorial endorsements. Mueller stated, "... it seems likely that there is no major impact of newspaper recommendation on proposition voting, especially over a series of ballot items" (p. 1206). This statement carries an authority that is not supported by his methodology. The first problem is that he made this statement based on data from one election. By the time Mueller published his results, Lang and Lang (1966) had

already made the case for longitudinal studies of effects on voter decision-making. Secondly, Mueller's sample size was not statistically impressive. His definitive statement was based on the comparison of 1085 absentee ballots to 209 ballots cast the day of the election. He carefully pointed out that the absentee ballots were a modified random sample, but no such assurance was given for the 209 ballots he was allowed to examine.

Mueller's later work (1970) supports the idea that in candidate elections lacking in traditional voter cues, editorial endorsements have greater impact. He looked at an extraordinary election held in April 1969 for the newly created Los Angeles area Junior College Board of Trustees. In all, 133 candidates qualified for 14 run-off slots that would lead to a seven-member board. Candidates recommended by either the Los Angeles Times or the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner showed a measurable increase in votes over those not recommended.

Hain (1975) verified the common sense notion that editorial endorsements had an impact on a elections in which half the electorate remained undecided only a few days before the election. Additionally, his findings supported McCombs' (1967) work when he found endorsement influence increased when the field was nonpartisan.

Sometimes election conditions exist which give researchers a unique look at editorial endorsements and election outcomes. Scarrow and Borman (1979) looked at a Suffolk County (New York state) district attorney race. A local newspaper, Suffolk Life endorsed the incumbent Henry O'Brien. The paper was delivered free to 98% of the homes in the eastern portion of the county. It had little or no circulation in the western portion of the county. The two other newspapers coming into Suffolk County, the New York Times and Newsday, did not take editorial positions on the race. O'Brien ultimately lost the contest, but the researchers determined that the editorial endorsement was worth a 20% increase in votes in the area covered by the newspaper.

In 1981 Coombs conducted an expansive study of the presidential race of 1972 and gubernatorial and senatorial races of 1972 and 1974. The study looked at dozens of newspapers in more than 25 states. More than 1,600 voters were interviewed three times over the period of the study. Coombs came to the conclusion that editorial endorsements definitely had an effect on voter decisions.

One measure used by Coombs (1981) was to analyze partisan defections when the newspaper endorsed the candidate of the opposing party to that of a subscriber. After subtracting out a base defection rate (the rate of

partisan defection when a paper endorsed the candidate of the same party as that of a subscriber) it was found that a 20% shift in the vote related to the editorial endorsements in his study. Coombs, however, did not generalize this percentage to future elections.

In a controlled environment, St. Dizier (1985) studied university students and found that editorial endorsements far outweighed party identification in affecting voter choices. As a consequence of the controlled conditions it should also be noted that St. Dizier's "election" was one with little information about the "candidates." Laboratory studies, and St. Dizier's is no exception, offer good sample control and very precise results at the expense of external validity.

Summary of the Related Literature

This review of the related literature was broad and covered questions not necessarily germane to this study. The following is a brief summary emphasizing the studies, or portions of studies, that eventually led to the research question posed in this research.

The research findings over the years are mixed as to whether newspaper editorial endorsements affect voter decisions. Prophetically, Gosnell's (1937) seminal research came to different conclusions depending on how he viewed the data.

It is encouraging that when researchers have looked at the subject with additional variables, such as partisan defections, non-partisan elections, and number of undecided close to election day, the relationship between editorial endorsements and voting results tend to be stronger.

Scarrow and Borman (1979), Coombs (1981), and St. Dizier (1985) found that contemporary voters can be influenced by editorial endorsements. Scarrow and Borman as well as Coombs found in independent studies a 20% increase in voter approval to newspaper editorial endorsements.

Studies of candidates have found that when traditional cues are absent, voter reliance on editorial endorsements increases (McCombs, 1967; Mueller, 1970). Ballot propositions are not candidates, but proposition campaigns clearly lack the cues traditionally used in voter decision-making.

To consider the money expended by a proposition campaign is to follow up on the idea that the more voices discussing an issue--be it paid media or not--tend to dilute the impact of editorial endorsements (Gregg, 1965). Finally, the dates that are emerging from this literature review--some go back 25 years and beyond--indicate it is simply time to take a fresh look at this question.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Consistent throughout the research is the idea that voters who have less information about a candidate or ballot proposition tend to rely more on newspaper editorial endorsements. Ballot propositions taken by themselves are even more interesting in that they do not have the personality of a candidate that many voters use in ultimately deciding. For the most part, all ballot propositions have are media campaigns. An assumption within this research is that the more money a campaign has, the more widespread the media effort. Consequently, the more media means the more voices the voter is exposed to and the less influence the editorial endorsement has. Data from the California general elections in 1982, 1984, 1986 and 1988 were gathered to answer the research question: Do newspaper editorial endorsements have greater impact on voter decision-making relative to modestly funded state ballot propositions?

Hypothesis: Editorial endorsements will have a greater impact on the voter decision-making process when a given ballot proposition has less to spend on a media campaign.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to test the research hypothesis posed in Chapter 2, data from previous elections were gathered and analyzed. The analysis was confined to voting on state ballot propositions in the 1982, 1984, 1986, and 1988 general elections. Editorial endorsements of the San Jose Mercury News and the Sacramento Bee were surveyed and the voting results of each paper's hometown compared with voting results of the entire state.

Researchers that look for influences on voter decision-making usually select from two generally accepted methods. The first is to ask voters directly why they voted as they did. Sometimes voters are polled more than once. The survey results are then tabulated and conclusions are drawn. The second method is to isolate a group of voters with some known characteristic of interest and compare their results to a control group or the population of voters. This follows the dependent variable, independent variable and control group model used extensively in research. Certainly other research methods exist; but these two, used either independently or in combination, account for most employed by contemporary researchers.

The interview method of collecting voter information is becoming increasingly suspect as the sophistication and subtlety of media messages grows. How the message is

transmitted is equally as important as the message itself. The media (including the political press and political advertising) no longer participate in the cultural dialogue, but have become the dominant framework of the cultural dialogue (Carey, 1989; Meyerowitz, 1985). As the sophistication in political reporting and advertising increases, it is less likely that the voter really understands what ultimately influenced his or her decision.

The second method of research, comparing a sample of voters to a control group or the population, is more attractive in that it eliminates the voters' opinion of what influenced them and assesses only actual voting tallies. The major drawback to this method is that not all research questions can comfortably fit into the model. Comparing sample vote data to the population is nearly ideal when a study, such as this one, is designed to detect the effects of editorial endorsements on voter decision-making. The sample was the voting result in each selected newspaper's hometown and the population was the statewide vote total. This design was better suited to the current research question, and decisions regarding sampling, data collection, and data analysis were determined with this in mind. Each of these decisions will be elaborated in turn.

Sample

As with any study, there are assumptions upon which the research is based. The fundamental assumption implicit in this research was that voters of both San Jose and Sacramento were exposed to essentially the same paid media and that the one distinguishing difference is the newspaper available to them. This would seem to ignore editorial endorsements made by television and radio. Such endorsements, when they are made, are ephemeral and cannot be carried into the polling place.

Selecting sample media markets for this study required consideration of various factors. The first was whether the markets were similar or contrasted in some measurable way. The second was whether the markets were large enough to attract virtually all paid media being generated by a campaign. A third factor was each market's proximity to a larger media market. Information contamination from the larger media market had to be considered in research design.

The San Jose Mercury News and the Sacramento Bee were selected for the similarities of the home markets. Similar markets were chosen to reinforce one another rather than providing contrasting data. Neither city is the media center that Los Angeles or San Francisco may be considered. At the same time, both cities are large enough to attract

nearly all the paid media being generated by a ballot proposition.

Finally, because of the expansion of cable systems, it is no longer safe to assume that the larger the population, the more sophisticated the media market. A good example of this is the comparison of Fresno, California and Bakersfield, California.[2] While Bakersfield is the smaller of the two cities, cable systems bring to it locally produced television from Los Angeles. On the other hand, Fresno's locally produced media is exclusively from Fresno. Bakersfield is an extension of the highly sophisticated Los Angeles media market.

The residents of Bakersfield are exposed to the political advertising aimed at Los Angeles, while the residents of Fresno are not. The choice of San Jose and Sacramento has mitigated this problem. Not only were both cities large enough to attract essentially all the political advertising being offered, if there were media contamination from another market, it would have come from the same source, San Francisco.

The elections studied were the 1982, 1984, 1986, and 1988 California general elections. Lang and Lang (1966)

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[2]Television programming for the elections studied were verified by an examination of the television schedules in the Bakersfield Californian and the Fresno Bee

suggest that studies of media effects need to be conducted over time. For this study, that meant looking at more than one election. At the same time, the distribution selected offers a balance of presidential and non-presidential campaign environments. Gregg (1965) indicated that the amount of information available to the voter affects how that information is processed. Clearly, a presidential election year provides more and more varied types of information for the voter. Balancing the campaign environments assures a more complete look at the dynamics of voter decision-making.

There is no question that longitudinal studies of voter behavior are essential, but researchers must also take into account the rapidity with which the election environment changes. It simply would not have been safe to assume that the 1968 California general election could be directly compared to the 1988 California general election. Confining this study to four general elections in 1980 satisfies the "observe more than one election" rule, while at the same time, keeps the study within reasonably similar media environments.

Data Collection

For each proposition over the four elections, specific variables were developed as follows: editorial endorsement position; Local Voter Agreement Percentage, an indicator of the impact of editorial endorsement; Financial Strength Index, a relative measure of a campaign's ability to generate media messages; and voting results for sample communities and state. In addition to variables necessary to hypothesis testing, circulation figures were obtained for each newspaper. Each of these factors is discussed below.

Editorial Endorsement Positions

The endorsed positions were obtained from the newspapers. Clark Library at San Jose State University contained microfilm of the newspapers within the study dates of November 1982 through November 1988.

Local Voter Agreement Percentage (LVAP)

The LVAP was an elaboration of the "plus rating" found in Gregg's (1965) study. A "plus rating" was defined as "... greater voter approval of an endorsed candidate or ballot measure within the county of circulation than at the statewide level" (p. 535).

As far as it goes, this is a very appealing method of looking at the relationship between editorial endorsements and voter decisions. Contrasting statewide vote margins against local vote margins and comparing the result to the

local paper's endorsements could very well reveal a relationship between editorial endorsements and election results. Obviously, finding the relationship in one election for one paper would not mean much, but to find it over multiple elections in more than one market could suggest a more than random relationship.

For this study the concept was modified to such an extent that it was no longer appropriate to use the term "plus rating." One oversight of the original concept was that it only looked at election victories. And then it only looked for a positive endorsement and an increase in the percentage of the local vote over the percentage statewide vote for the winning candidate or proposition.

Implicit in the original concept was that editorial endorsements can shift local vote margins when compared to state margins. There is no reason to limit this application to positive endorsements and prevailing candidates or propositions; if a shift can be detected in the positive direction it can also be detected in the negative direction.

This study was designed so that whether a proposition succeeded or failed was immaterial. The local vote percentage agreeing with the editorial endorsement was compared to the state voter percentage agreeing with the

endorsement.[3] For example, if the San Jose Mercury News recommended "no" on "proposition one" then the local percentage of "no" votes was compared to the statewide percentage of "no" votes. If 58% of the state-wide vote was "no" on "proposition one" while 65% of San Jose voters vote was "no," then the local voters were in agreement with the endorsement by a surplus of 7%. This can be construed as the strength of the paper's endorsement. These data, termed Local Voter Agreement Percentage (LVAP), were computed for all propositions in the four elections in the two media markets. The LVAP could thus be a positive number indicating endorsement influence whether the proposition won or lost and whether or not the local voters agreed with the statewide voters. See Table 1 for illustrative examples.

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[3]This is not to imply that the statewide vote was influenced by sample local media endorsements. It is simply counting the voters across the state who cast their ballots, for whatever reason, aligned with the newspaper endorsement.

Table 1

Example Local Voter Agreement Percentage (LVAP) Ratings

	Editorial Endorsement	Local vote percentage agreeing	State vote percentage agreeing	LVAP
"Prop. One"	no	65	58	+7
"Prop. Two"	yes	52	43	+9
"Prop. Three"	no	48	45	+3
"Prop. Four"	yes	47	53	-6

Financial Strength Index (FSI)

Since this research looked at the four elections as an aggregate rather than four separate events, a method was devised to more accurately rank the propositions by the money the campaigns expended. Rather than rank propositions by the dollar amounts each expended, the ranking was done on the basis of money as a percent of the total money expended by all propositions for that campaign year.

The implicit assumption in this ranking system is that campaign messages are received within the context of an election environment. Some elections (e.g., non-

presidential) tend to generate less media "noise." The highest funded proposition in a non-controversial off-year election may compare to the bottom third of funding for propositions in an election containing highly charged issues. Such an imbalance was avoided by ranking by percentage of total of a given election.

The financial information about each proposition was obtained from the Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) in Sacramento. The FPPC is the state organization that regulates and monitors, among other things, political campaign financing. Any individual or committee that spends more than $1000 on a political campaign must register and file monthly statements with the FPPC.

Committees may be established in favor of or against a proposition and such committees will be so designated by the FPPC. Within this study no effort was made to distinguish between funding donated in support of or opposition to a given proposition.[4]

After computing FSI's for all propositions, they were divided into three groups representing low, medium, and high

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[4]Starting with 1988, the FPPC reports presented financial data categorized into either support or opposition. Prior to 1988, financial reports show totals only with no break down into support or opposition.

values. This was done to permit examination of LVAP values in each of the three FSI clusters.

Voting Results for Sample Communities and State

All voting information, with the exception of the computed variable of local percentages, were obtained from the California Secretary of State. Specifically, raw data pertaining to voting results came from the document "Statement of Vote" for the given election and year.

Sample Newspaper Circulation

The San Jose Mercury News (L. Jinks, personal communication, March 1, 1990) and the Sacramento Bee (P. Bhatia, personal communication, July 3, 1990) provided circulation figures for 1982, 1984, 1986, and 1988. Although these data were not required for hypothesis testing, they were of tangential interest to the research.

Data Analysis

The raw data were collected and entered into Q & A and Quattro, data analysis software for the personal computer. Preliminary descriptive statistics were generated as well as the computed variables LVAP and FSI. These data were in turn uploaded to the mainframe computer and hypothesis testing was accomplished using SPSS-X software.

Descriptive Statistics

Measurement of central tendencies and distributions were computed for all continuous data. For each election means and standard deviations were derived for the amount of money expended per proposition and for the number of votes cast for all propositions. The former figure was derived because it was useful to portray the findings within a larger context. Average votes cast per proposition were calculated because the number of votes cast for each proposition varies. These descriptive statistics were also generated for the computed variables (i.e., LVAP and FSI). Finally, frequency counts were generated for endorsement positions for each paper per election and the number of propositions generating zero dollars.

Hypothesis Testing

The research hypothesis posits that the influence of an editorial endorsement will relate indirectly to a proposition's campaign funding. It was, therefore, necessary to compare LVAP ratings for various levels of monies expended, operationalized in this study as the FSI. As noted on page 24, once the FSI values were obtained, they were designated as low, medium, and high values. Hypothesis testing was then accomplished by a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). This method was selected because it

permitted the comparison of mean LVAP values for low, medium, and high FSI's. The ANOVA test was applied to identify significant differences among the groups. A Scheffe' post hoc test was used to determine which groups were significantly different from each other.

Historically, it is known that some propositions generate or expend no money. Given the likelihood that such propositions would have existed in the sample elections, an alternative hypothesis test was planned. Omitting those propositions with FSI value of zero permitted the division of remaining propositions into two groups. Mean LVAP could then be computed for these two groups. The hypothesis test would then be a *t*-test, permitting the comparison of two mean values.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The findings did not support the hypothesis that voters would rely more heavily on newspaper editorial endorsements when a ballot proposition had relatively little or no funding compared to other propositions on the ballot. Furthermore, the findings suggested a relationship opposite of that which was predicted. These findings failed to achieve statistical significance.

Procedures for data collection and analysis were described in Chapter 3. Results of the study are presented in this chapter. First the descriptive findings will be presented. Results of hypothesis testing will follow.

Descriptive Findings

Facts About the Newspapers and Propositions

Data were collected on 73 propositions and two newspapers over four sequential general elections. This section examines the descriptive findings about the newspapers, the propositions, and the average vote totals per proposition.

The sample newspapers tended to offer favorable endorsements over negative ones by almost two to one. The newspapers experienced steady but not unusual growth over the time studied. This information is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Facts about sample newspapers

Yes/No Endorsements (For state propositions for general elections in 1982, 1984, 1986, and 1988)	
Sacramento Bee	
Yes n = 45	
No n = 28	
San Jose Mercury News	
Yes n = 48	
No n = 25	
Circulation	
Sacramento Bee (Daily for Sacramento)	
1982	57,886
1984	55,843
1986	60,677
1988	66,835
San Jose Mercury News (Daily for San Jose zone)	
1982	185,301
1984	199,351
1986	204,090
1988	205,639

In 1982 15 propositions appeared on the ballot, 16 were fielded in 1984, in 1986 there were 13 and by 1988 the number increased to 28. This information is detailed in Table 3. The total amount of money expended by the campaigns exceeded 200 million dollars with fully half of that spent in 1988. Total expenditures, as well as average per proposition, were higher in presidential election years.

Table 3

Facts About Study Propositions

Number of propositions per general election	
1982	15
1984	16
1986	13
1988	29
Total	73
Number of propositions generating zero dollars per general election	
1982	3
1984	10
1986	8
1988	11

Table 3 (Continued)

Facts About Study Propositions

Total dollars spent on propositions per general election		
	1982	Total = 24,259,794
		Mean = 1,617,316
		S.D. = 2,848,401
		Range = 00 to 9,896,101
	1984	Total = 32,385,036
		Mean = 2,024,064
		S.D. = 3,573,645
		Range = 00 to 10,433,669
	1986	Total = 22,547,944
		Mean = 2,734,457
		S.D. = 1,713,032
		Range = 00 to 7,780,453
	1988	Total = 129,229,531
		Mean = 5,310,841
		S.D. = 12,128,882
		Range = 00 to 55,895,185

An average vote per proposition per general election was determined for both San Jose and Sacramento (see Table 4). This was necessitated because not all voters cast ballots for each proposition. San Jose followed a

predictable pattern with higher voter turn out for presidential elections than off-year elections. Sacramento, however, had the lowest average per proposition in 1984, a presidential election.

Table 4

Average Votes Cast per Proposition per General Election

Sacramento		
1982	Mean =	106,176
	S.D. =	4,818
	Range =	98,002 to 114,417
1984	Mean =	94,088
	S.D. =	2,444
	Range =	90,325 to 98,734
1986	Mean =	121,523
	S.D. =	3,687
	Range =	112,758 to 129,509
1988	Mean =	125,181
	S.D. =	4,130
	Range =	117,463 to 133,531

Table 4 (Continued)

Average votes cast per proposition per general election

San Jose		
1982	Mean =	151,004
	S.D. =	7,201
	Range =	140,615 to 162,615
1984	Mean =	213,966
	S.D. =	6,598
	Range =	198,424 to 225,151
1986	Mean =	151,047
	S.D. =	3,886
	Range =	145,670 to 158,173
1988	Mean =	220,181
	S.D. =	7,882
	Range =	202,203 to 234,851

Descriptive statistics were also derived for the computed variables (see Table 5). The computed variables, LVAP and FSI, yielded a wide margin of variation. Additionally, the FSI contained a remarkable 33 cases of zero value.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics on Computed Variables

Local Voter Agreement Percentage (LVAP)	
(N = 146)	X = 1.93
	S.D. = 4.01
	Range = -6.54 to 14.69
Site One (n = 73)	X = .54
	S.D. = 2.70
	Range = -5.41 to 7.21
Site Two (n = 73)	X = 3.31
	S.D. = 4.60
	Range = -6.54 to 14.69
Financial Strength Index (FSI)	X = 5.54
(N = 73)	S.D. = 10.67
	Range = 0.00 to 43.25
	Frequency of 0 values = 33

Hypothesis Testing

Preliminary Computation

Before applying the one-way ANOVA, FSI values were assigned to low, medium, and high groups. A traditional way to identify three such groups is to divide the data into tertiles. The low group then contains the third of the sample with the lowest values. The high group would contain the third of the sample with the highest values. Finally, the medium group would contain the remaining third. This method yields three groups of equal size.

An examination of the distribution of the FSI values indicated that dividing them into tertiles was inappropriate (see Figure 1). Fully 45.2% of the FSI values were 0. Another 19.2% were values between 0.01 and 0.99. For this reason, the data were visually inspected for clusters and levels were determined according to them.

The cluster that comprised the "low" level of FSI were those values = 0.00 (n = 66). The cluster of values that defined the "medium" group ranged from 0.01 to 13.00 (n = 52) while "high" group FSI values were 13.01 to 44 (n = 28). These choices yielded groups adequate in size, the value ranges of which were reasonably comparable. For example, had the low value of the "high" group been raised (as the

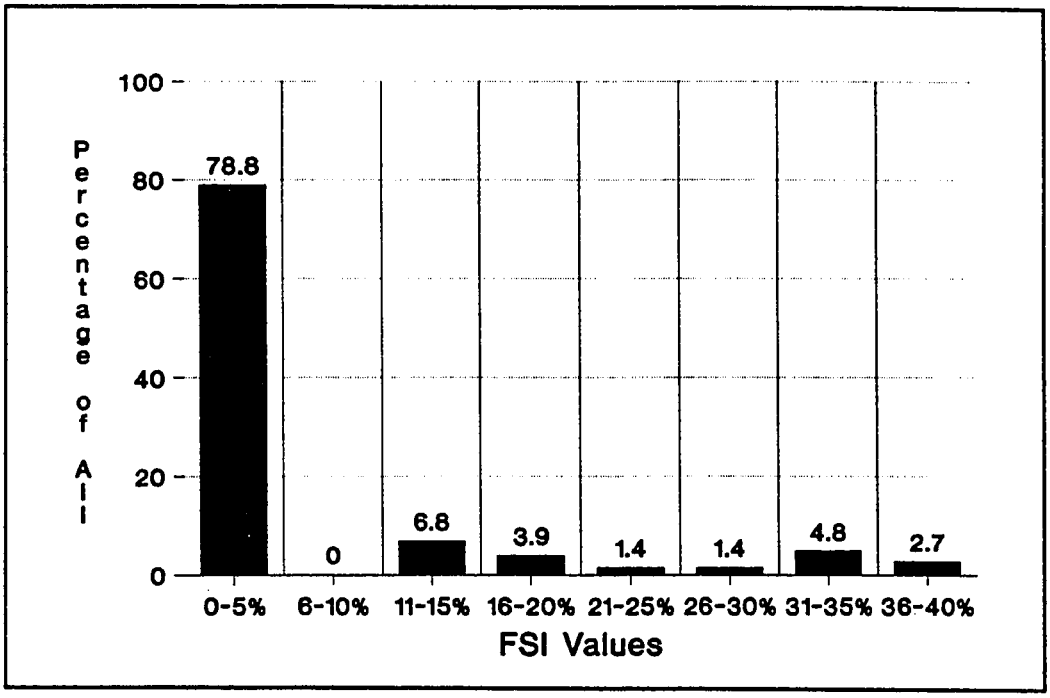

Figure 1. Distribution of Financial Strength Index (FSI) Values

values might suggest), the size of the "high" group would have been disproportionately small. Figure 2 illustrates mean LVAP values for each category of FSI.

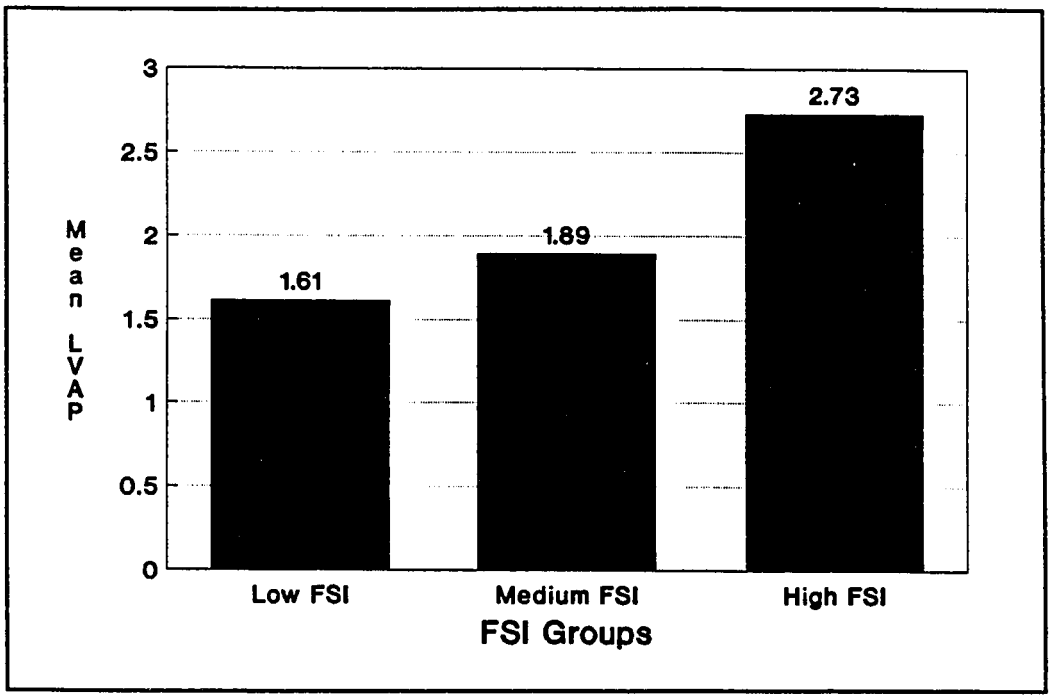

Figure 2. Mean Local Voter Agreement Percentage (LVAP) values for each group of Financial Strength Index (FSI) values

Hypothesis Tests

The one-way ANOVA was conducted using all three levels of the independent variable (i.e., FSI = low, medium, and high). The results are presented in Table 6. The *F* ratio is .771, and the *p*-value is .47. By this test the research hypothesis must be rejected.

Because FSI zero values were so numerous (*n* = 33), a decision was made to eliminate the low group from analysis. A *t*-test was thus conducted comparing the mean LVAP for the

medium and high groups. The mean LVAP for the medium group was 1.89 while the high group LVAP mean was 2.73. The *t* value equalled -.88 and the *p*-value equalled .38. The research hypothesis was again rejected.

Supplementary Data Analyses

An examination of Figure 2 suggests that a direct correlation might exist between LVAP and FSI values. Specifically, it suggests that voters' agreement with editorial endorsements might increase as more money is expended, which would be counter to the research hypothesis. A correlation coefficient was derived, however, on the strength of Figure 2. The correlation between LVAP and FSI was .07, which was nonsignificant.

Table 5 indicates that mean LVAP for one newspaper was 0.54 while it was 3.31 for the other. A *t*-test for difference of means was conducted on these values, and it was highly significant ($p = .0000$). The voter agreement with their respective editorial endorsements was significantly higher in Sacramento.

Because the two communities differed markedly in their voting agreement with editorial endorsements, correlations were run for each community separately. Coefficients were $r = 0.13$ and $r = 0.04$, neither of which was significant.

Table 6

Results of Hypothesis Testing

One-way ANOVA (FSI grouped: low, medium, and high)	
Mean square, explained	12.41
Mean square, residual	16.10
F ratio	.771
Degrees of Freedom	2, 143
p-value	.47
t-test[a]	
Medium group, LVAP	X = 1.89
(*N* = 52)	S.D.= 3.85
High group, LVAP	X = 2.73
(*N* = 28)	S.D. = 4.46
t value	- .88
Degrees of Freedom	78
p - value	.38

[a]FSI = 0 = Low Group was dropped. Analysis conducted on medium and high FSI groups.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The ballot proposition in California has become an important legislative instrument in the hands of voters. While each election has its share of run-of-the-mill bond measures, the ballot frequently contains propositions dealing with complex constitutional issues or laws seriously affecting the business climate within the state.

Controversial ballot proposition campaigns are highly sophisticated, but differ significantly from candidate contests. The most obvious difference is the lack of a person or candidate. Thus, the image created for a proposition campaign is done so almost entirely in the media.

The lack of a personality and increased reliance on both free and paid media may very well alter how the voter reaches his or her decision as compared to a candidate campaign. Research in voter behavior suggests, among other things, that the voter's reliance on newspaper editorial endorsements may increase in ballot proposition campaigns. The research further suggests that such reliance may increase for propositions with little or no spending as compared to controversial campaigns buying large amounts on political advertising.

The purpose of this research was to test these implications within the research literature. Specifically,

the hypothesis was that newspaper editorial endorsements will have a greater impact on the voter decision-making process when a given ballot proposition has less money to spend on a media campaign than a proposition having greater amounts of money to spend.

The methodology for this research was relatively straightforward. The general elections from 1982 to 1988 inclusive were studied. The editorial recommendations of the San Jose Mercury News and the Sacramento Bee, as well as voting results from San Jose and Sacramento were used.

The ability for a ballot proposition campaign to generate political advertising was equated directly to its campaign funding. It was assumed that the more funding a campaign had the more political advertising it had. Campaign funding was ranked as a percentage of the total funding for a given election year to compensate for the wide range of funding from election to election. That is to say, funding of $10 million may have been near the top in one election while near the bottom in another. Ranking by percentage kept the top spenders from election to election together, the mid-range spenders together, and so on.

Local voting results were compared to state-wide results in an effort to detect the influence of newspaper editorial endorsements. A local vote percentage agreeing with an endorsement higher than that of the state-wide

percentage agreeing was interpreted as positive for the endorsement.

As was reported in Chapter 4, the raw data suggested an inclination opposite to that of the hypothesis. In other words, that voters seemed to agree more with editorial endorsements about propositions having more campaign funding than those propositions with modest or no funding. Statistical significance was not achieved, however, for this alternate hypothesis, so it too must be discarded.

This chapter will examine the methodology and then interpret the findings. These two views should yield suggestions about both improving the study and refining the hypothesis. The synthesis of these enhancements will result in the third part of this chapter, future research.

Methodological Considerations

If it is assumed that the hypothesis is correct, then the methodology must be looked to for the lack of statistical significance. The results of a study frequently suggest refinements of the research design. The results of this study indicated two areas in which the design could be further enhanced: the first was sample size, and the second was certain assumptions the study used as a point of departure.

Increasing the sample size can directly affect the findings. The failure to gain statistical significance may

mean that the hypothesized relationship does not exist, but it may also indicate that the relationship was weak and the study not sensitive enough to detect it. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, the sample for this study could be easily expanded.

There are three assumptions relied upon in this study that must be reconsidered. The first is that research based on candidate elections will directly apply to proposition elections; the second is that voters continue to get a large amount of their election information from the major local daily newspaper; and, the third is that ballot proposition campaign contributions are directly proportional to the media generated by that campaign. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

The first concern examined is the reliance on literature devoted to candidate elections. In retrospect, it appears that this was the weakest element within the design of this study. The implications of this may be somewhat unsettling. Researchers may have to reconsider the existing body of scholarly knowledge about how voters make decisions with regard to ballot propositions.

It was a main point of this research that proposition and candidate elections differ significantly. With this in mind, care was taken when selecting candidate-election research for use as a point-of-departure. After studying

the results of this research, however, one must question the validity of using any candidate-election theories when designing research into voters and ballot propositions.

The second assumption to be questioned is the connection between voters and newspapers, specifically, the editorial pages. Here again, for this study, the connection was based on past research. Campaign and media environments are changing so rapidly that older studies may be of little use as points-of-departure for new research. Relationships established within a ten-year-old or older study may have to be independently reestablished in any contemporary study of the media and their influence on voters.

The consequences of this could be extremely burdensome to future researchers. Establishing a statistical link between voters and an election information medium is usually considered a major study unto itself. To have to imbed such a study within research that is looking for more refined effects could create experimental designs that are fragile, intricate, and nearly impossible to fulfill.

The third assumption to be examined is that, in the case of ballot propositions, campaign contributions are directly proportional to media campaigns. While this remains a valid assumption, it could be refined.

Each committee accepting and spending money (more than $1,000) to influence propositions elections must file

detailed documents with the California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC). Studying these documents could reveal to researchers just what percentage of campaign contributions were spent on media.

Interpretation of Findings

Keeping in mind the design considerations just outlined, it is now possible to examine and interpret the results of this study. This research found no significant relationship between newspaper editorial endorsements, local voting patterns compared to state voting patterns, and campaign funding of California state ballot propositions.

The literature suggests that, in the past voters relied on newspaper editorial endorsements under certain conditions. This may no longer be the case. Although some of the studies in the literature looked at candidate elections, the balance between candidate and proposition campaigns should have been enough to construct a valid hypothesis.

Additionally, a strong difference in agreement was found between the two cities. The voters of Sacramento agreed with the editorial endorsements of the Bee to a greater degree than the voters of San Jose agreed with the Mercury News. It should be noted that this result was not part of the original hypothesis and was a secondary

calculation within the study. This difference achieved statistical significance.

In interpreting the results the temptation to abandon the idea of the influence of editorial endorsements should be resisted. It makes sense to consider that many voters continue to rely on editorial endorsements, but question the source of these endorsements. In conducting this research, people anecdotally reported that they did indeed use editorial endorsements, but did so from specific interest groups or the alternative press. The Sierra Club newsletter Yodeler was mentioned more than once and the San Francisco Bay Guardian was also mentioned. Keeping in mind that this was anecdotal, it raises the possibility that voters who rely on editorial endorsements may get such information from publications sympathetic with their own political inclinations.

Another possibility that must be given greater attention is the already mentioned idea that ballot propositions have the "no" option. Past research suggests that undecided voters tend to become more reliant on editorial endorsements as election day approaches, but that is for candidate elections. Perhaps now, with regard to ballot propositions, the undecided voters tend to vote "no." This idea was given some credence in the 1990 general election when rather than mounting opposition campaigns,

opponents put competing initiatives on the ballot. The result being, in most cases, that both initiatives were voted down.

It must be considered that the voice of the editorial endorsement is being lost in the overwhelming volume of political information. It is unfortunate because intuition would suggest that it is being substituted with political advertising. Some newspaper endorsements may contain ulterior motives beyond a recommendation, but editors still have to face their constituents the day after the election. Newspapers tend to be stable members of the community that are frequently held accountable by their constituents. Those who create political advertising have no such reckoning with which to contend.

Even though editors may have to face their constituents later, it is not safe to assume that they are completely objective. If controversial ballot proposition campaigns are highly mediated, then it must be questioned what effect all this media has on newspaper editorial writers. No doubt such writers use careful reflection in studying election options, but it would be naive to expect that they are completely immune to the persuasive powers of political advertising. Such would be a version of the "bandwagon" effect in which the judgment of editorial writers is colored

by pervasive and sophisticated political advertising campaigns.

As was previously stated, a statistically significant difference was found in the percentage of endorsement/voter agreement between the San Jose Mercury News and the Sacramento Bee. Although this was discovered tangentially to the main result of this study, it demands discussion.

The obvious difference between San Jose and Sacramento is that Sacramento is the state capital. It would be intuitively comfortable to attribute the endorsement/voter agreement difference to this fact. To be truly meaningful, however, this comparison would have to be tested in various newspaper markets.

Future Research

This section will be divided into two parts. The first part will be a brief discussion of replicating this study with an increased sample. The second part examines what the results of this study suggest about future research directions.

Replicating this study with a larger sample would not be difficult. It is possible that enlarging the sample would yield statistically significant results. The simplest way to increase the sample is to add the primary elections to the study. This research confined itself to the general elections.

A method of changing sample is to include more newspapers in the study. One concern discussed was the similarity of newspaper markets. As this study was conducted it became apparent that cities did not have to share political predispositions. A city and newspaper considered politically liberal, therefore, could be in the sample with a city and newspaper considered politically conservative with no negative impact on the study. It should be noted that it is beyond this study to look at conflicting political predispositions of cities and their newspapers.

An essential assumption to this study is that voters at each site could have been exposed to equal quantities of outside media messages. The integrity of this assumption would have to be maintained in any elaboration of this study. With cable television distributing metropolitan stations into rural areas, however, it would not be difficult to again double the sample size by carefully selecting additional newspaper markets.

One area that offers little help in expanding sample size is the time frame over which the study was conducted. It would difficult to increase the sample by including either older or newer elections. As of this writing the 1990 general election has come and gone. New political tactics were used in the 1990 proposition campaigns to such

an extent that it could be persuasively argued that the election would not be appropriate for inclusion in this study. If the current rate of change in political campaign tactics continues, then the "window" of similar campaign environments available to researchers would only narrow.

Replicating this research may have merit, but the implications of this study suggest there are areas that may need to be completely reconsidered by scholars. This study has posed more questions than it answered. Some of these questions may be recast into lines of scholarly inquiry.

The first area that must be researched in the study of the media, voters, and ballot initiatives is the presence of the "no" option. Such an option does not exist in candidate elections and voting for an incumbent candidate is not the same as rejecting a ballot proposal. There is no question that votes for candidates can be cast for various reasons, but the simple fact remains, the public may not vote to reject all candidates in a contest. Deciding not to vote may be considered an expression of discontent, but there is no evidence that politicians interpret it as such. Research into voter decision-making and ballot propositions may have to isolate the proposition campaigns and study them independent of candidate campaigns.

The "no" option available in ballot proposition elections is a clear and absolute difference from candidate

elections. There also exists some less clear differences. As has already been said, ballot propositions lack a personality and a track record. Both of these are important components when voters make decisions about candidates.

The difference between candidate and ballot proposition elections may be so great that new baselines must be drawn. One place to begin is by asking voters directly what influences their voting decisions with regard to propositions. This would most likely have to be some mix of repeated surveys leading to an election and election day exit polling. A comparison of local voting results to a state "baseline," as was used in this study, could be used to check the results of such a survey.

Any survey of the information sources used by voters and potential voters would have to accommodate less traditional sources. The alternative press, endorsements of special interest groups, radio and television advertising, and mailed campaign literature; to name a few, would have to be considered on equal footing with the customary sources of campaign information.

Political campaign strategies are increasingly treating the voter as a consumer and this is creating a unique information environment. A contemporary election is the only time a voter/consumer is exposed to both balanced and rational information (news) and highly emotional and

intentionally persuasive information (campaign advertising). The effect of this mix of information on voter decisions is one which contemporary mass communications researchers will have to contend. It is looking as though attempting to simply synthesize existing campaign research with existing advertising research will not yield useful information.

It could be argued that highly mediated political campaigns have been around long enough to be in the research literature. What this argument ignores is the shift in form of political campaign advertising. Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign was highly mediated, but the end product was to look balanced and rational, that is to say, like news (McGinniss, 1969). Contemporary campaigns (local to national, proposition or candidate) are increasingly using "impressionistic" advertising that in no way could be thought of as contributing to rational campaign debate. How this mix of information affects voters is clearly an area that will have to be researched.

The future research presented here was broad and could be elaborated upon and refined ad infinitum. Such detailing would serve no useful purpose here. What is clear is that the relationship between voters, campaigns, and the media have changed enough that accepted ideas may have to be rethought. It may not be good enough to simply ask the traditional research questions in a contemporary setting.

New research questions will have to devised that reflect the changes in modern political campaign environments.

Conclusions

Sometimes when researchers seek to detect subtle influences they discover flaws in their instruments of measurement. It may be said with reasonable certainty that such a discovery was made with this research. Determining how California voters make their decisions has become a very difficult area of academic research. While scholars take a slow and prescribed approach to producing knowledge, the political consultants make quick decisions based upon intuition as much as anything else. The scholar draws up a plan and sticks to it, but the political campaign can change strategies, even consultants, several times before election day.

Analyzing media effects on voters has been made even more difficult as the consultants adopt modern advertising techniques to win elections. Voters seem vulnerable to these techniques and the free market place of ideas is giving way to a free-wheeling assault of images and impressions.

These changes in the political campaign environment should not discourage social researchers, but challenge them. Research techniques will have to be refined to provide in depth information over shorter time periods.

Survey methods will have to be developed to measure attitudes as well as opinions. Research results will have to be integrated with a factor of the campaign environment to be truly meaningful.

The road ahead for those wanting to know more about how the media affects voters will be a demanding one. The mass media may have completely changed the social context in which voting occurs. Some older concepts will have to be used with certain reservations, while others will have to be discarded completely. It may well be that we are in the end of an era of mass communications research. If that is so, it contains the promise of a new era to be studied with new research concepts.

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